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By the REV FATHER MATURIN Rector

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S CLEMENTS PULPIT

Second Series

No 1

THE SOWER

A Meditation

By the Rev Father Maturin Rector

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow :

And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside, and the fowls came and devoured them up :

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth : and forthwith they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth :

And when the sun was up, they were scorched : and because they had no root, they withered away.

And some fell among thorns : and the thorns sprang up, and choked them :

But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.—S. Matt. xiii : 3-8.

The seven parables in S. Matt. xiii, show us under various images the mystery of the work of grace, and follow one another in a close sequence of thought. The first two tell the causes of the failure of grace to produce its proper effect in the soul. The third

and fourth show under two different figures the power of grace—its intensive and extensive power. The fifth and sixth describe how different kinds of men receive grace, and the last, the final separation when the time of probation and the work of grace here below will have ended.

In the first parable our Lord speaks of the natural hindrances, in the second of the supernatural hindrances to the workings of grace in the soul. In the parable of the wheat and tares, we hear of an "enemy" following in the footsteps of the sower,—another person besides the sower who can plant his seed in the soul. Here we hear of but one sower—but one seed—yet of great failures. The seed cannot grow, but the reason is because there has not been sufficient care taken in the preparation of the soil.

But let us notice first of all the light which this parable throws upon the great purpose and work of the Incarnation—the gift of grace. It was to sow a seed in man's nature—that the Son of God became Man, to give to him something which he could not get for himself, and without which his nature could never attain to its perfection. There could be no fruit unless the seed was sown; the soil might be well prepared, weeded, ploughed, and tilled, but it needs something more in order that it may be fruitful. And the sower came to give it that one thing needful—"the sower went forth to sow," and our Lord tells us what that seed—the perfecter of man's nature is—"the seed is the Word of God;" and S. John tells us what the Word of God is—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God * * * and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." And again, in his epistle he says, "This is the record that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." The Sower, then, went forth to sow His seed—the seed is the Word, which was made flesh, which whoever hath, hath life. In other words, the Son of God came down from heaven to give us His own incarnate life to be the perfecter of our nature. This gift is bestowed upon us by a definite act of God's toward us. The Sower goes out day by day to sow His seed in the soul of

man. Whoever has had this seed sown in him is a Christian; whoever has not, however good he may be, he is not a Christian. A Christian is one who has been made partaker of the Divine Nature. The one great outcome of the work of Christ which we must seek in man, is the possession of "that which by nature he cannot have." We often see men who are honest, pure, true, upright, who do not believe in Christ—but it need not surprise us to find men who have every natural virtue, though they are not Christians. What Christ came to give was something which no man has by nature. I am not surprised to find that soil rich and free from weeds and thorns, because I know what pains the gardener has taken with it; but I should be surprised to find it bearing fruit when no seed was planted there. All that *belongs* to the soil, *of itself* it may have—but it cannot have more, except it be given it. Therefore, when we are shown the noble characters of many men who are unbelievers, this need not make us question the need of grace. We see in the man all that belongs to a well-disciplined and well-trained nature, but nothing divine. The Sower has not sown His seed.

This gift is described in the parable as a seed, something which, while it is the source of the life, depends upon the soil for its nourishment. Wrapped up in the folds of the seed is the mystery of life, but the moment it is placed in the soil it becomes affected by it. The character of the soil can help or neutralize the life in the seed. As it cannot grow of itself, it is entirely dependent upon the soil in which it is placed. It has, it is true, an *existence* of its own quite independent of its surroundings. But once it is planted it becomes affected by the soil.

And so it is with grace. It is not a magical power that can make us good in spite of ourselves. It is a seed to which the earth of our nature must lay open its bosom and yield up its powers. The sacraments are not charms; they will not make us other than we want to be. It is true, like the seed, they have an existence outside of man's nature. But with equal truth the moment they are received they become dependent upon the soul that has received them, whether they will be fruitful or barren. There is room left

for the full exercise of the free will, notwithstanding the greatness of the gift which is received. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." The opening is our own doing. We might receive the sacraments every day and be none the better for them, because, between the seed and the soil there was no intercommunion. In the Holy Communion we receive the presence of our Lord, yet the moment the sacrament passes our lips its power is dependent upon ourselves, whether the soil of our nature be the beaten path, the rocky ground, the thorny ground, or the good ground. The sower can do no more than sow the seed. The result of the sowing is dependent upon the soil.

This explains some difficulties in regard to baptism. A person comes to baptism after he has reached maturity. We watch him before and after. We know the habits which he had before; the many faults and imperfections, and we watch to see the great change effected by baptism. We expect to see him changed in a moment, the old habits broken and new graces at once showing themselves. But we are disappointed; we see no great change. Perhaps no change at all, and we ask how can this be. If by baptism we are born anew; if in it we die to sin and rise to righteousness; if it is indeed all that is meant by regeneration, why do we not see the change at once? The answer is, in baptism the *seed* of the Divine life is sown. It may grow to perfection or it may never grow at all, but it is sown, and just as one sees no change in the earth for many days after the seed is planted, no more can we expect to see an immediate growth of that most delicate of all plants.

Again, we see a man coming to baptism in a state of impenitence, from some unworthy motive perhaps. Immediately after baptism he returns to his old sins. We ask is he regenerate, or is he not; if he is not why should he not, if he repented, be baptized again? The answer is, the seed of the regenerate life has been sown, but it fell on hard ground. We tell him not to get baptized again, for that could do him no good; but we bid him repent, break up the land again—the seed is there, let it sink in, and the Divine life will manifest itself. We need not lose our faith in

grace and the sacraments because we so often see little or no fruit resulting from them, any more than we should lose faith in the life of the seed because of a famine—we should seek for the cause of failure in the soil.

So then, the sower goes out to sow seed, but its growth is not dependent upon him, but upon the nature into which the seed falls.

Our Lord then goes on, in the parable, to show the causes of failure—why it is that so many people get such different degrees of help, some more, some less, some none at all, from all the means of grace—how it comes to pass that of two persons making their communion at the same time, one goes away strengthened and helped, another is conscious of no help at all.

And, as I said before, in this parable He makes no mention of the Devil. The fault, so to speak, is not the Devil's but their own. It is not necessary to suppose that the Devil is the cause of all our failures and all our sins; in many cases the fault lies entirely with ourselves. All the causes of failure mentioned in this parable were faults *in the nature*—in the soil, not put there by another, like the tares. They may be all summed up in one word—want of thorough preparation. They could all have been remedied with care and watchfulness. The one soil that *was* ready, the good ground, brought forth abundant fruit, though the same seed was planted in it that fell upon the others.

Let us look at these different kinds of soil one by one, and the kind of fruit that each of them will bear. They are the three great widespread causes of failure, and to one or other of them each of us will probably be able to trace most of our own failures.

1. "And when he sowed some seeds fell by the wayside." This is the only case where there is absolutely no growth from the seed at all—where the seed never takes any root—"the wayside" open to every passer-by. Constantly trodden by them ever coming and going—no retirement—no quiet—no rest, though once the ground may have been soft and received the impress of every footprint, yet now it receives no impression; any one may tread upon it, but no one leaves his mark behind; the seed may rest upon it for a moment, but it is powerless to push its way through

the hard soil that owes its hardness to the multitudes that are constantly passing and repassing upon it. "He receiveth the word and understandeth it not"—there has been no assimilation. The two have come for the moment in contact—the seed and the soil—but that is all.

This is a terrible and graphic picture of the soul that has lost its power of receiving any deep impression, into which nothing can really sink below the surface, which does not let the words which it hears "sink into the heart," which never thinks deeply—never assimilates or makes its own the deep mysteries of the faith. A mind which is laid open to every chance passer-by—unguarded and undisciplined—which for a moment comes in contact with the great gift of life and does not even know it—this is indeed a hindrance to the work of grace—it will not allow itself to be touched, it will not give itself time to be impressed. If a person will not *think*, all the grace in the world can't help him. The mind that is in a constant whirl of distraction and excitement, that is utterly unguarded and open to every thought that suggests itself, cannot give any nourishing power to grace, and though it may receive sacraments yet no sacrament enters in and imparts strength.

"Some seeds fell by the wayside." God does offer them His grace—gives it to them—but they will not use it.

If then we find that sacraments and prayer do us no good; that for the moment, while we are brought under religious influences our feelings are touched but nothing lasts—nothing seems to have any power to change or deepen us—we ought to ask ourselves whether the fault is not entirely our own. We perhaps have in our hearts blamed God, and thought He did not do as much for us, or give as much to us, as to others—yet what can He do unless He has our co-operation. The thought of all He has suffered for us, all He has given to us, seems to have no effect—but why? Is it not because we will not *think?* "Commune with our own heart in our chamber and be still"—practice mental discipline. Try to concentrate our thoughts on the things most worth thinking about—struggle with all our might against superficiality—we might indeed ask ourselves whether it is only

religious things that have such little power over us, or whether it isn't so also with everything else. Just as the mind begins to lay hold of and digest some thought it drifts into another channel and the thought is gone before it had sunk in and taken root. We need to remember that the mind with which we think and study and do our daily work, or which wastes its power and fritters away its strength in idleness or day dreams or pleasure seeking, is the same mind with which we pray and by which we draw near to God. And in religious matters it will be no different from what it is in everything else. If our minds have become so dissipated that we cannot think out properly the matters which concern our earthly life, it is no wonder that they cannot lay hold of the mysteries of faith.

If then we can trace most of the failures of grace to this cause —mental dissipation and superficiality—we know the remedy. Enclose that beaten path and shut it out from unrestrained traffic, try to take more time to quiet and retirement, have regular times for prayer and also for thought, think over what you hear and read and do. Try in everything, temporal as well as spiritual, to think more deeply and more thoroughly. To an undisciplined mind there is perhaps no more intense pain than that caused by an effort at concentration, but if we are patient and persevering we shall succeed in recovering the powers of mind which had well-nigh been lost, and by enclosure, cultivation and care, the beaten wayside will become good ground.

2. "Some fell upon stony places where they had not much earth * * * and when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away."

The soil here described is a rocky ground covered with a thin layer of earth. The seed has not enough soil to lay firm hold and spread out its roots, it springs up quickly, exhausts its strength and withers away.

Here our Lord describes a soul which fails in two ways; it grows too fast and does not give up its whole self to nourish the seed. It will allow the roots to spread so far and no further. There is a point beyond which the seed of grace cannot penetrate.

The cause of the failure, our Lord says, was "because they had no root they withered away."

It is not, I think, the description of a superficial nature, such as we last described, the hard rock beneath the soft surface seems to imply rather strength than superficiality. There is in this nature a definite hindrance blocking the way to the full healthy growth of the Divine seed. The seed unfolds itself and begins to grow and penetrate downward till it touches the hard rock and can go no further. It is the description of a soul that has never given itself wholly and without reserve to God, it keeps back part. The seed may go a certain depth but no further. There is a part of the character that has never yet been reached or touched. How often we meet with these double-sided characters. Men who on the one side have strong religious instincts, "who hear the word and anon with joy receive it," but who have another side of their nature quite unsanctified and untouched by grace, "have no root in themselves." They feel it themselves after the excitement of their first turning to God. They are not sure of themselves. They know how down in the depths of their nature they are not changed. In watching such men we are often puzzled what to think of them. Sometimes it seems as if they must be insincere, they are so uncertain and contradictory. But they are not greater puzzles to others, perhaps, than they are to themselves. They are certain that they have religious feeling, at times seem ready to do anything, indeed, do too much, and then there is a great reaction and the unsanctified nature asserts itself and places a most definite barrier to the power of grace.

We cannot make bargains with God, or set a limit to His demand or our offering. Many persons deliberately, many more unconsciously, however, do this. Some men think they have given themselves altogether to Him, they do not know with how tight a grasp they hold themselves Still beneath the soil there is the rock, around which the root may spread itself, but cannot penetrate. They do not know themselves, they test themselves only by their feelings and emotions, not by their acts, they mean to do so much more than they do. With others it is different, with their eyes wide

open they have made their conditions, they will give a certain amount to God, but will not give *themselves*. They do not mean to be led on too far, they have given up some great sin that ruled them in the past, but lesser sins and self-indulgences they do not give up, nor even strive against, though they know their danger. The result is that their life is a failure in both directions. They never bring forth any ripe fruit either of grace or of nature—they lose both worlds while they are bargaining to keep a hold of both.

If such be our case, let us make up our minds, if we would bear the fruit of grace, and feel its power and its joy, there must be no tampering with evil, no bargaining with God. He will have all or nothing. The seed of grace must have room to grow, or it can bring forth no fruit to perfection.

3. "Some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up and choked them." S. Luke explains this as "they which, when they have heard the word go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life." Under the image of the thorns, then, our Lord includes the hindrances to grace that arise from the difficulties and the comforts of life, two things exactly opposite, yet having the same result. With some the seed of grace that had begun to grow gets tangled and choked by the hardships and trials of life, with others by its pleasures. The poor often envy the rich, and think how easy it must be for them to be good, and the rich often feel how few in comparison can be the temptations of the poor; but each state, great poverty and hard work, and great wealth and ease, while acting in different ways, has a tendency to produce the same result in the soul, to choke out the supernatural life. Heaven grows dim to the eye weary with watching, and to the heart embittered by trial, and Heaven also fades away before the bright glare of this world—"The god of this world blinds the eyes lest they should see the glory of the gospel in the face of Jesus Christ."

If our lot be placed in hardships, then, of whatever kind, we must be on our guard against this danger lest, in the difficulties of this world and the hard struggle of life we forget the next world. Labor indeed has its blessing, but how often we find men faint and

fall under its weight. Tired out in mind and body, weary, disheartened and discouraged, with nothing to stimulate hope, and all the experience of life but a growing knowledge of its sorrows, they have neither heart nor will to exert themselves to pierce through the darkness of this life to the glory that shall be revealed, and they stumble and fall under the burden that should have led them to Him who said: "Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." It needs a strong faith and a determined will to be able to stand out against the lowering and demoralizing influence of hard work. The constant fret and worry to gain the very necessaries of life and the absolute need as it seems to have the mind and body engrossed in the effort to secure temporal needs, gradually seems to paralyze the powers of the soul to see and strive after the things which are eternal, and the cares of this life, like thorns, choke the good seed that had begun to grow and once promised well. The cares of a large family, the labor of a large parish, the strain of constant anxiety, the overtaxing of the mind or body by continued work, gradually brings the mind that had begun to gaze upwards to turn its eyes to earth, till at last it became impossible to lift the drooping lids and the eyes became heavy and dull and lustreless and all high hopes and aspirations died out.

If our position in life, then, puts a constant tax upon heart or mind or body we need to be on our guard. The difficulties of such a position may be a great help and lead us to look above for the strength which we cannot get below, but they may, and alas how often they do, absorb all our energies till none is left for God, and "the things which should have been for our use become to us an occasion of falling."

But if poverty, hard work and trouble have their dangers, so certainly have riches and pleasure. Working in a different way they produce the same result, "they choke the good seed." It is difficult for one whose life is spent in a constant round of pleasure and amusement, and who has everything that this world has to give, to live for the other world. Many persons who have had strong religious instincts, and began with great earnestness in their earlier

years, and then have gone into the world, after a few years have found that their religious aspirations have gradually and almost unconsciously died out. It is often difficult for those whose social position calls them more or less into the world to know when and where to stop. The people one meets are not bad, perhaps they are better than we are ourselves. The pleasures we enjoy are harmless. It seems as if we have no right to stand apart as though we were better than others. But we do not pass judgment upon anyone but ourselves. To others it may do no harm. But if I find that it lowers the tone of my life, that it takes away my earnestness, and makes me lax, I am bound to break away. There are many who can go constantly into the world and preserve the brightness of their baptismal robe. There are others who are of such a temperament that they get carried away and lose themselves. Those who like it most will find the world and its pleasures most dangerous to them. Balaam longed to go to the court of Balak. God, who knew him better than he knew himself, forbade him; but he *would* go; he went, and the good seed was choked, and he fell into fearful sin. Moses shrank from returning to the Egypt from which he had once fled. God sent him back there. He went and was protected. Lot saw the comforts and richness of Sodom, yet with his strong religious character, he thought he could withstand it. He went there, and though his righteous soul was vexed, we have but to read the narrative of that last fearful night, to see how unconsciously he had become tainted by the evil around him, till at last, to save himself, he had to fly. How much one may enjoy this world's pleasures and mingle in the great world, must be a question for each individual to decide for himself, and each must remember that the effect that these same pleasures have upon others, can have no weight in their decision for themselves. What may be quite harmless, or even good for one man, may be the ruin of another.

A life absolutely devoid of any difficulties or deprivations is not likely to know much of the power of the cross and to bring forth the fruit of grace. God may have given some of us much of this world's goods, only that we may give it all up and follow Him.

But of all he demands to give up something, to endure self-denial, to forego many of the pleasures or indulgences that in themselves may be harmless, that by the voluntary sacrifice of the things of this world we may be enabled the more to nourish the seed of Divine grace.

If then our lot is cast in easy places and we have much enjoyment and many of the good things of this world, and if we find that our aspirations after holiness are failing, that our faith grows weak and our fervor flags, let us take care lest it be the choking of the seed that had begun to grow. It may be that we need to give up some of the pleasures that we have enjoyed; that we need more strictness, more watchfulness, more self-sacrifice, more quiet and retirement. It may be that upon such things the very existence of our spiritual life depends.

For "some fell upon good ground and brought forth fruit—thirty—sixty—an hundred-fold." If the soil be good the seed will grow. If the soil be bad the seed cannot grow. The seed is given us by God—yea, it is the very nature of God Himself, but in the soil of our undisciplined nature God Himself may be powerless. "Without me ye can do nothing" but "Behold I stand at the door and knock." Without our co-operation He can do nothing in us.

So then, the sower goes out to sow the seed—the seed is always good—has always the same power—but the soil into which the seed falls may hamper, or destroy, or nourish it. It was the seed in the good soil of Saul's soul that made him what he was, and it was the bad soil of Judas' soul that hindered the growth of the very same seed in him.

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